

St. Peter's Church,
VanCortlandtville, Westchester County,
New York,

HABS No. 4-106 HABS
N.Y.
60-VANCOV

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

District No. 4
Southern New York State

Historic American Buildings Survey
Wm. Dewey Foster, District Officer,
25 West 45th Street, New York City.

SAINT PETER'S CHURCH
VanCortlandtville, Westchester County, N.Y.

Location and Date

VanCortlandtville is a small village in the Town of Cortlandt, near the northwest corner of Westchester County, New York. It is just beyond the northern border of Peekskill, which is now one of the largest incorporated villages in the United States, and the principal community on the original 20-mile-wide Manor estate of Stephanus VanCortlandt, which extended from the Croton River on the south to Anthony's Nose on the north.

The first step towards the erection of a house of worship on VanCortlandt Manor was on March 23, 1750, when Andrew Johnson, husband of Catherine VanCortlandt, conveyed ~~six~~ acres for that purpose. The deed, recorded in Liber H, p.339, of Westchester County records, at White Plains, describes the location of this little church which stands in the center of VanCortlandt Cemetery about two miles north of Peekskill.

See History of St. Philip's Church in the Highlands, Garrison, N.Y. Including, up to 1840, St. Peter's Church on the Manor of Cortlandt, by E. Clowes Chorley, B.D., 1912, p. 19.

The gift of the land was not utilized for sixteen years. In 1766, certain subscribers, both of the Manor of Cortlandt and the lower part of Philipse' Upper Patent (now Putnam County), appointed trustees "for directing and carrying on a building, and for securing it to the inhabitants as a place of public worship, according to the establishment of the Church of England."

Ibid., 20.

The church, erected on an elevation of ground to the east of the VanCortlandt homestead, was called St. Peter's, and was dedicated and opened for regular use on August 9, 1767, by the Rev. John Ogilvie, D.D., of New York. The foregoing facts are also inscribed in an old quarto Bible, printed in 1728, a gift to the Church from the wife of Beverly Robinson, one of the first trustees. The church was not finished at the time of the opening service, but it subsequently became "a decent and comfortable building."

Ibid., 21, 33.

Architectural Features

A solidly built, box-like structure, St. Peter's is a very small and exceedingly plain church. Still in a good state of preservation, it is an excellent example of a class of small parishes churches that once were numerous.

There is no tower or steeple; and the door, in the middle of the south side, is without door-head or porch. A narrow balcony or gallery at the west end and running down the south side, which shows on the plans, was probably for servants. There is no chancel, as there is only sufficient room for a small, low, platform. No pews were provided, and the people sat upon rough-hewn benches; but in the early days the vestry rented "ground" in the church to individuals for the purpose of erecting pews.

Ibid., 54, citing Vestry Minutes.

There was no heating apparatus when the church was built, and none has been installed since.

Roof and floor are new, and there have been some minor repairs and replacements, such as a few clapboards, which

are wide, hand-cut bevelled siding, most of which are original. Architraves, both interior and exterior, are the delicately moulded originals. The window sash appear to be replacements; and the plank shutters are known to be modern, having been put up for security. Although within the memory of the present custodian, the building was at one time used for a cemetery tool-house, it has since been cleaned and suitably been furnished for use again as a church. (From field-notes of the architects of the present survey.) This renovation occurred in 1927, in anticipation of its reopening on August 9, on the 160th anniversary of the first religious service.

Bulletin, Westchester County Historical Society,
Vol. III, no. 3, July 1927.

Historical Glimpses

A complete record of Vestry Minutes from Colonial times to the present has been kept, with the exception of the long break from 1775 to 1790 when no meetings were held, owing to the Revolution and its aftermath.

The Episcopalians, having had the assistance of the Presbyterians in building the church, gave them the privilege of using it. It was, therefore, to that extent an early example of a church for community worship. Andrew Johnson's deed for the land specified that the church which he desired to be built should serve "for the religious" under the King's protection, whether "Church of England, Presbyterians, Independents, Papists, or Congregationalists, etc."

Chorley, 20.

The royal charter, however, signed by Lieut. Gov. Cadwallader Colden under the date of August 19, 1770 (recorded in the

Book of Patents, Albany), sets forth that it was built as "a place of Divine Worship...to be according to the Church of England as by law established."

The charter also recites, among other provisions, the names of the wardens and vestrymen, who shall have perpetual succession, etc., and shall enjoy the rights of property, both real and personal, for the use of the church, "provided always that the clear yearly value of the said real estate (exclusive of the said church and the grounds whereon the same is built, and the cemetery belonging to the same) doth not at any time exceed the sum of one thousand pounds current money of our said Province."

At the first meeting, on September 1, 1770, a subscription was set on foot to procure the appointment of John Doty, a graduate of King's College serving as lay reader, to be the first minister.

Chorley, 31, 32.

The Vestry sent the candidate to London with a letter and petition addressed to the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts. The letter, dated October 15, 1770, says in part that "the Church is in a thickly settled country (tho' no kind of public worship is established in the neighbourhood)." The subscription for the support of the minister was shared by the people "in the neighbourhood of Jacob Mandeville on the lower end of Philipse' Upper Patent in the County of Dutchess" (that is, those living in the village of Garrison in the present Putnam County), on condition that, if they would join in the building of St. Peter's Church, and in the subscription for the support of the minister, he should also serve as missionary to them,

"so as to make one congregation of the whole." The writer adds the wish that there were enough people to call it a parish.

Ibid., 34-35, citing N.Y. Fulham Archives, Vol. II, p. 524-6, Hawks Collection.

The Vestry agreed at an early meeting that the "Common Seal of ye Corporation be a Dove with an Olive Branch in his mouth"; and around this the words "Seal of St. Peter's Church and St. Philip's Chapel, New York."

Ibid., 38.

When the Rev. John Doty returned in 1771 from his ordination in England, the parsonage was not yet built, but he became the guest of Beverly Robinson. On March 23, 1772 the Vestry met and passed this laconic resolution - "Unanimously agreed to go and build Mr. Doty a house." An agreement was entered into with Jerediah Frost "to git the timber, draw (haul?) the same, the boards and other materials which he may want for the said house. To do all the Carpenters and Joyners work, and paint and glaze the same for seventy five pounds." Further details are given. That house became the first rectory of the parish. It stood on the Glebe Farm, in the southeast corner of what is now Philipstown, in Putnam County.

Ibid., 38.

Hardly had the parish been established when the War of the Revolution broke out with the most disastrous results to these two United Churches. The rector and the senior warden (Beverly Robinson) were Tories. There was no meeting of the Vestry for fifteen years and the churches were closed.

Ibid., 39.

In March 1777, Colonel Bird with a detachment of British troops visited Peekskill and destroyed much valuable property.

Ibid., 41, citing Jones' History of New York during the Revolution, I; 177.

St. Philip's Chapel was stripped bare, and St. Peter's Church was much injured. French troops occupied the parsonage house, and left neither fence nor lumber, on the Glebe. This damage to the parsonage and farm was afterwards recompensed. (Chorley, 41, citing Archives of Trinity Corporation, January 18, 1796.) The money recovered was not used, however, to pay for needed repairs to the two churches and parsonage, but to pay an earlier debt.

Ibid., 43.

On Easter Monday, 1795, an appeal was sent to Trinity Church, New York City, for financial help. The Vestry said in their petition that, although the two churches were "tottering to their fall," they had been partially repaired, but much more was needed to make them "convenient" for use. The sum of 200 pounds was desired for each church.

Ibid., 44, citing Trinity Archives, 1795.

St. Peter's on its part, received \$750 from Trinity in 1797, and more later.

Ibid., 48-51.

The six acres of land surrounding the church was partly used for burial purposes, and the rest for pasture, etc., to aid in parish support.

Ibid., 55, citing Vestry minutes.

Graves of the known Revolutionary soldiers buried in the cemetery of St. Peter's Church have been marked by the Daughters of the Revolution. As reported by Mrs. Margaret McCord Robinson, Regent, these now number forty-two. They include the grave of John Paulding, one of the captors of Major André. The monument to Paulding's memory was erected by the City of New York in 1827.

Lossing, Field-book of the Revolution, I, 739, where is also printed a small wood-cut view of the church.

In 1803 a fence divided this land from that of the Baptist Church.

Ibid., 55.

In 1810, James Mandeville was directed by the Vestry to have some little repairs done to the pulpit and a desk made in front of same.

Ibid.

After 1830, the connection between St. Peter's and St. Philip's was nominal. When Daniel Birdsall built the first store in the village of Peekskill in 1764, it marked the drift away from the Village of Cortlandt. A new Episcopal congregation was organized in Peekskill in 1829, and a new church was built there in 1838.

Ibid., 63.

In 1840, after an association of seventy years, St. Peter's and St. Philip's "came to the parting of the parochial ways."

Written, April 23, 1934, by

Thomas W. Hotchkiss

Thomas. W. Hotchkiss,
118 Pine St., Peekskill, N.Y.

Approved

Wm. Dwyer Foster

Reviewed 1936, H.C.F.